

## Interview with author M. G. Sanchez (August 2008)

Tell me a little about yourself? Who is M.G. Sanchez?

M. G. Sanchez is a Gibraltarian who found himself in a dead-end job back in 1994, went to study to the UK, ended up doing a BA, an MA and then a PhD, and now is trying to give a little back to the community by writing about his hometown.

How many books have you written?

Three books so far. *Rock Black: Ten Gibraltarian Stories* – a book of short stories. *Writing the Rock of Gibraltar* – a study/anthology of Victorian writing on Gibraltar. And now *The Prostitutes of Serruya's lane and other Hidden Gibraltarian Histories* – a book of essays. I also published a small booklet back in 1999 when I was a student entitled *Rock of Empire: Literary Visions of Gibraltar, 1700-1900*.

Where and when did your interest in writing begin?

I guess it started when I was at Bayside Comprehensive School. I was fortunate enough to have some very good English teachers in the form of Mr. Martin Gonzalez, Mr. Angelo Bonavia and Mr. Kevin Dobson. They kindled an interest in literature and writing within me that is still there today.

Why Gibraltar - have you written about anything else?

I write about Gibraltar because I was born here and I feel a strong connection to my homeland, but that does not mean that I write exclusively about the Rock. Currently, I am working, among other things, on a book about modern Bombay and I have also written some articles in the past about sixteenth-century British history. Basically, I write about anything that takes my interest.

Tell me about your latest book – *The Prostitutes of Serruya's lane and other Hidden Gibraltarian Histories*?

The new book is an attempt to uncover some aspects of our Gibraltarian past that have lain dormant or suppressed for many years. There are essays in it on smuggling, racism, prostitution and other similarly 'underground' topics. I have tried to aim the book at the intelligent layman rather than at the university scholar, as I believe that history should be open to as many people as possible.

What did you find the most fascinating?

Without doubt the amount of new stuff that I was uncovering about our past – whether it was about smuggling, prostitution or racism against the native Gibraltarians. It is always great to bring forgotten things out into the open.

Are you constantly looking for items on Gibraltar?

Writing about Gibraltar is almost like treasure hunting – you have to be prepared to do a lot of investigative work, look in the most recondite places and follow the tips of your friends and peers. In that sense, yes, I am constantly looking for items on Gibraltar.

How do you carry out your research?

Until recently, I had done most of my research at the British Library in London and the University of Leeds (where I studied). But I have now started doing some work in Gibraltar itself.

You delved into fiction with the book of short stories *Rock Black* - are you looking to do this again?

Absolutely. Fiction for me is as important as historical writing – in the sense that it is about bringing together stories that are in circulation, but which will eventually be forgotten if no-one puts them into print. One of the things that I have found most frustrating about my travels, if I am to be honest, is how little people know about Gibraltar and us Gibraltarians. Either that, or what they know has been filtered through an English or Spanish prism, as it were. It is only by putting our stories together, by explaining to them where we come from and where we are heading, that these people will know that we are a unique community with our own history and traditions. If we don't, then they will simply believe all that baseless propaganda published by those who don't look so kindly upon us.

So what are you working on now?

I am working on one or two projects at the moment. One of them is the book on Bombay I mentioned a few minutes ago. Another is a book on nineteenth-century Gibraltar which is a kind of follow-up to the one I published some months ago. It will be called *Diary of a Victorian Colonial and other tales*.

I hear you have been living in India for some time? How did this come about?

My partner is currently working for the FCO and in August, 2005 she had the opportunity to go and work in India for three years. After discussing the matter together, we decided that this would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity which we would be stupid to miss.

Has it proved the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that you thought it would be?

Yes, very much so. India is a fascinating place which leaves an indelible impression upon you – even if it sometimes makes you want to pull out your hair in sheer frustration. Being based in India, also, has enabled us to visit countries that we never imagined we'd ever visit – including China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Nepal, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and a few others in the area.

What have been the highlights?

Probably going to the Golden Temple in Amritsar. I went there late at night with the intention of seeing the Harmandir Sahib (or holy of holies) during a religious ceremony. Out of the seven or eight hundred people there, I was the only foreigner. Every time the Sikh worshippers saw me, they kept on moving out of my way and urging me forwards. After a few minutes, thanks to them, I found myself at the very front of the queue, literally within inches of the chanting gurus. That felt really special.

And the lows?

I'm not sure. Spending eleven days in an Indian hospital in October 2006 with Dengue Fever, probably – although I was also pickpocketed near Tiananmen Square when I was in Beijing and asked for a 'tip' by a policeman in the city of Almaty in Kazakhstan. That was kind of interesting in its own right too.